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Pressure to Impeach Nixon May Be Eased By His Newest Plan to Handle Watergate

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KEY BISCAYNE, Fla. — President Nixon's [illegible] strategy for coping with Watergate, while leading him into some embarrassing admissions, may reduce the public pressure for his impeachment.

On display in recent days has been Mr. Nixon's latest program for getting beyond Watergate, one of a series of distinct strategies he has tried since last spring.

This one is a mixture of candor and public-relations gimmicks, combined with increasingly vehement assertions of his innocence and vague promises to disclose eventually the facts to prove his innocence.

So far, despite a flurry of new presidential rhetoric, there hasn't been any sign of the "full disclosure" that Republican lawmakers have said the President told them last week he's planning. Mr. Nixon is at least sounding a bit more candid than he has in the past, and this may win him some of the public support he badly needs to turn off the impeachment drive on Capitol Hill.

The President's new strategy got a tough workout Saturday night near Orlando, Fla., when he took questions from newspaper editors before a nationwide television audience. In spirit of what White House aides have said is a new determination to meet Watergate "head-on," Mr. Nixon found himself making some embarrassing confessions.

National Security Reasons

Yes, the Secret Service did wiretap his brother, Donald. (But it was for national security reasons, the President explained.)

Yes, he had taken a $500,000 deduction on the gift of his vice presidential papers and, thus, had paid only "nominal" income taxes in 1970 and 1971. (But the whole thing was Lyndon Johnson's idea, the President explained.)

Yes, he probably should have asked campaign director John Mitchell about White House involvement right after the Watergate break-in. (But back then that seemed pointless, since he assumed Mr. Mitchell would have told him if he had known anything, the President said.)

Yes, his campaign got some illegal corporate contributions last year. (But so did the Democrats, because people didn't know "the law had been changed," the President explained.) Actually, the Federal Corrupt Practices Act of 1925 prohibits corporations from contributing to campaigns for federal office.

But on the broader question of whether he is guilty of an impeachable offense, Mr. Nixon didn't provide any new evidence. Further, he continued to leave in doubt, despite what some Republican lawmakers have said he promised them last week—whether he intends ever to make public the seven tapes of his key Watergate conversations.

Regarding the tapes, he said:

"... I trust in some way we can find a way at least to get the substance to the American people." This suggests he intends to release, if anything, only a summary statement of their contents.

Even so, the President said the tapes would prove "beyond question" that he hadn't known in advance about the Watergate break-in, had turned down the idea of clemency for Watergate defendants "whenever it was suggested," and hadn't heard any talk of paying "blackmail" money until last March 21.

Answers His Own Question

Mr. Nixon was remarkably feisty, gesturing vigorously, cracking jokes, and even telling the television people to "keep me on" past the allotted time so he could answer his own question about the milk case.

The feistiness was still apparent after the President had left the Disney World Hotel, where the session was held.

Approaching a portly, balding man standing beside his son at a fence, Mr. Nixon asked the man whether he was the boy's "mother or his grandmother." Mystified by the question, the man finally answered that he was neither.

"Of course you're not," said the President, and then he soundly slapped the man's face and walked on, according to two newsmen who witnessed the incident. "The President slapped my daddy," the boy was telling people in the air terminal later.

Yesterday, Mr. Nixon flew from Key Biscayne to Macon, Ga., where he spoke at a ceremony honoring former Rep. Carl Vinson of Georgia.

A huge and friendly crowd welcomed the President when he arrived at Robins Air Force Base near Macon. In his brief remarks at the air base and at the Macon ceremony, Mr. Nixon made only a couple of passing references in jest to his Watergate problems, focusing instead on the need for a strong national defense.

The private ceremony occurred in the chapel at Mercer University. Anti-Nixon students were gathered outside, but saw the President only for a moment as he was entering his limousine to leave. He responded to their loud booing with a smile and a wave.

Mr. Nixon, who has been proclaiming his innocence for months to an increasingly skeptical public, did it again Saturday—and in the strongest possible terms.

"I'm not a crook," the President declared, in what surely must be a unique public utterance in the history of the presidency.

Making embarrassing admissions, asserting he isn't a crook, and finding it necessary to say repeatedly that he won't resign presumably aren't pleasant tasks for Mr. Nixon, a proud man who's conscious of the dignity of the office he holds.

The fact that he's doing all this provides dramatic proof that he's aware of the gravity of his problems. And, as he himself seems to recognize, he'll have to do still more before Watergate can finally be put behind him.